

Capitalization

“*Capital*” is derived from the Latin “*capitalis*,” which means “of the head.”

Writers capitalize too many words. Perhaps they think that capitalizing a word makes it More Important. Of course, this is not true. Is *President* more important than *president*? Just as with the use of commas, you must have a reason to capitalize a word. The “capitalization” entry of the AP Stylebook lists several reasons to capitalize a word. Here are some of the highlights:

PROPER NOUNS: Capitalize words that represent a specific person, place or thing.

I love my sister, *Martha*, and my brother, *David*.
Scuba diving off *Little Cayman Island* is a reminder of the wonder of nature.
If you invested in *Enron*, you’re not a happy camper.

PROPER NAMES: Capitalize common nouns if they are an integral part of the full name for a specific person, place or thing.

Members of the Republican *Party* had a party after winning back the White House.
The Mississippi *River* is wider than the average river.

Entries with additional information about proper names

animals	food	months
brand names	foreign governmental bodies	monuments
building	foreign legislative bodies	nationalities and races
committee	geographic names	planets
congress	governmental bodies	plants
datelines	heavenly bodies	police department
days of the week	historical periods and events	religious references
directions and regions	holidays and holy days	seasons
family names	legislature	trademarks
		unions

POPULAR NAMES: Capitalize places and events that have earned a place in the popular lexicon. Capitalize even shortened versions of one-of-a-kind events.

I’ll never be rich enough to live on the *Main Line* outside Philadelphia.
Now that baseball season is here, the *Series* is just around the corner.

DERIVATIVES: Capitalize words that are derived from proper nouns and that still depend on those proper nouns for their meaning.

Many *Americans*, but by no means all, are *Christians*.
In my next life, I want to be a *Shakespearean* actress.
BUT: Not eating *french fries* requires a *herculean* effort from me.

SENTENCES: Capitalize the first word of a sentence.

This rule should be easy to remember.

AFTER COLONS IF.....: If what follows a colon is a complete sentence (it has a separate subject and verb), then capitalize it.

I say again: *Too* many people capitalize too many words.
Here's my complaint: *the* rampant use of capital letters.

COMPOSITIONS: Capitalize the main words in the names of books, movies, plays, poems, operas, songs, radio and TV shows, works of art, etc.

I watch "*The Wizard of Oz*" every year.

TITLES: Capitalize formal titles when they are used immediately before a name. Lowercase such titles when they come after a name or are used alone.

The *Queen* Mother died this weekend, devastating her daughter, the *queen*.

When in doubt, consider these two tips from members of the American Copy Editors Society:

1. If you would use the title with a person's last name (President Bush, Mayor Daley, the Rev. Graham), it's a formal title. It would look strange to write "Clerk Doe" or "Manager Smith," so those are job descriptions or occupational titles: "department manager Mary Smith."
2. If the person would ever be called by the title – Mr. President, Chairman, Ambassador, Senator, Congressman – it's a formal title that needs to be capitalized when used before the name.

ABBREVIATIONS: Capitalize letters in some, but not all, cases.

Members of the *FBI* joined the *SEAL* team to learn how to *scuba* dive.

Examples from some of the other entries that contain guidelines on capitalization

DIRECTIONS AND REGIONS: I drove *east* to avoid the fires in the *West*.

FOOD: I like *Russian* dressing on my *brussels* sprouts.

HISTORICAL PERIODS AND EVENTS: The *Dark Ages* occurred long before the 18th century.

HOLIDAYS AND HOLY DAYS: *New Year's Eve* is a good night to stay home.

LEGISLATURE: The Kansas *Legislature* debated the intelligent design theory a few years ago.

MONTHS: I was born *July* 7, 1954.

PLANETS: What on *earth* would make you want to leave planet *Earth*?

PLANTS: My favorite tree is *white oak*, but the *Douglas fir* is great in December.

RELIGIOUS REFERENCES: Capitalize *God* or *Allah* but lowercase pronouns such as he.

SEASONS (lowercase): Isn't *spring* great?

TRADEMARKS: *Laundromat*, *Dumpster*, *Kleenex* and *Xerox* are just a few trademarks.